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# Pedagogical Meaning of the Cultural Visits for the Host University Volunteers: Through the Eyes of Leaders

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## Abstract

This paper examines the learning of the volunteers who organized and led the cultural visits to Hiroshima or Kyoto for two days during the National Model United Nations (NMUN) Japan that was hosted by Kobe City University of Foreign Studies in 2016. By being responsible for cultural visits, volunteers learned the process of identifying meaning for participation, experience of working with an organization and accompanying responsibility as a leader, willingness to contribute to the inter-cultural understanding of delegates and collegiality.

Key words: National Model United Nations Japan, cultural visits, experiential learning

## 1. Introduction

I would like to begin this short paper by briefly writing what is MUN (Model United Nations) and how KCUFS (Kobe City University of Foreign Studies) became a hosting school for NMUN (National Model United Nations), because the focus of this paper is the learning of volunteer students who worked behind the conference scenes. Model United Nations is known as an educational simulation program for university students to experientially learn the process of solving international conflicts and problems in the world. Simulating the real process of problem solution, MUN makes it possible for participants to discuss wide range of issues as regional conflicts, environmental problems, human rights, and economic aids to developing countries. Now there are quite a few organizations that are tackling Model UN simulations, and among them the biggest organization is NMUN run by NCCA (National Collegiate Conference Association), whose first conference dates back to 1927.

At Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Professor Zenuk-Nishide had recognized the significance of teaching MUN as a means of foreign language education in the early period of her career and been teaching for years; first at a high school context, then universities. With the cooperation of Professor Tatsuki, they decided to stand as a hosting university for 2016 NMUN. Thanks to their great appeal to NCCA along with the support from the university, KCUFS was chosen as the first host university for NMUN in Japan.

Although there are numerous reports about the efficacy of MUN as a means of education, not many seem to have been written about the learning of students who supported the conference behind. Thereby focuses of this paper are to be put on the experiences of students who were involved in NMUN not as delegates but as volunteer leaders of programs such as Cultural Visits or logistic sections. The reason is two-fold: 1) In contrast with such already established thematic areas of MUN, such as General Assembly, Security Council, UNESCO and others, the learning of volunteer students who work for pre-conference programs or logistical sections are not much discussed, while the level of commitment, the time and labor they devote to their mission are none the less smaller than those of delegates, 2) Cultural Visits are an important part of International NMUNs where delegates can experience cultural and historical sites by visiting sites and learning with the assistance of students of the host university. What was to be provided as a culturally meaningful tour and how the process of learning

would be assisted are for the area host students to decide and work on: a huge space to fill. Thus taking this opportunity, I would like to make an attempt to shed light on their work, examine how KCUFS volunteer leaders filled the above space and analyze their learnings through the process of preparation for the conference referring to their voices.

## 2. Learning of Volunteer Leaders through NMUN

The National Collegiate Conference Association puts the following three words as reflecting the pedagogical characteristics of MUN. They are ‘cooperative, hands-on, and experiential’. My initial question in writing this short paper is whether or not this philosophy can be extended to other programs under the name of NMUN, such as Cultural Visits or the organizational logistic work. As I was involved in the Cultural Visits as a faculty advisor, I am going to probe the pedagogical meaning of ‘cultural tour’ from the view point of hosting students, who challenged this event with limited resources and completed their mission with brilliant results. For the purpose of examining students’ experiences, I would like to refer to leaders’ written reports submitted after the conference as a source of analysis. Names of leaders are put into pseudonyms.

## 3. Emerged Meanings of Cultural Visit for the Host-school Students

### 3. 1 Process of identifying meaning for participation

In contrast with students who participated as delegates or committee leaders, those who chose to participate as volunteer leaders to plan the cultural tours or engage in logistical jobs had gone through different tracks. Students’ report presents the existence of unique individual meaning-making processes through which leaders inquired themselves about their roles in the whole project.

F begins her inquiries by asking herself for whom does MUN exist:

*For whom does MUN exist? For delegates, for students of KCUFS, for the university or for Kobe? For whom do I work and what work is expected of me. I had been asking these questions throughout the preparation period. Personally I think MUN is the program for students who participate in this conference.*

F worked as chief volunteer leader of Kyoto tour who planned the whole trip with the assistance of M. Her continuous inquiry implicates that she was examining her role as

a leader through the whole period in dialogue with herself.

On the first day of the Kyoto trip, F came across a very difficult situation in which she had to decide the cancellation of visiting Kinkakuji temple due to the pressing schedule of bus service and announce it to delegates during the lunch time. It was a very difficult decision knowing too well about the importance of the visit to Kinkakuji-temple herself. With few little tears in her eyes, but with a firm voice she told participants the reason of sudden cancellation of the highlight of the day and asked delegates for understanding. Unexpectedly, the audience responded with applause as if demonstrating their understanding to her decision, which was a moving moment. As expected, however, she had to confront with claims from some groups requesting to leave from the tour to make the visit to the temple. Allowing the splitting of groups must have been a painful moment for her.

What had made her decide the cancellation of the visit then? F wrote in the beginning of report, “Safely bringing the group back to Kobe was the mission of first priority.” F had put up ‘safety’ as one of the important maxims of her responsibility as a leader. It may be the result of her critical inquiry with her role, with which she made important decisions and survived difficult moments in process.

T connects part of the reason of her participation with her grandfather who experienced the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima and died of an unusual type of bone cancer. She writes,

*(In my decision of volunteering for the leading position of the cultural visit program,) I thought there might be something that I could do because of my identity as the third generation nuclear-bomb-victim in Hiroshima.*

This was how she started her work as a leader and continued to explore identifying her own meaning through the process of preparation. T visited Hiroshima again and again, met volunteer guides and bomb experience storytellers, and her motivation seems to have increased clarity through the process. She notes that meaning making was the most important thing for her and feels that she was able to accomplish the mission because of her firm motivation.

Reading student leaders’ reports, what struck me was the depth of their inquisitive dialogue inside and its continuity as a process. Motivation is an important drive for

students to initiate actions for MUN, but their reports disclose different aspect of motivation. Motivation for them is not a mere drive in the initial stage but a continual process of trying to clarify own meaning, and it gets clearer and firmer through the process. Motivation is a progressive process for them.

### 3.2 Experience of working with 'organization' and the accompanying responsibility as a leader

Many leaders list their interest in the experience of working with 'organization' as a reason of participation. T says she wanted to experience what it is to be in the position to organize a group and work for it as part of such renowned international program as NMUN. M confessed her lack of experience about being a leader and took it as a great challenge throughout the program. F wrote about her learning of leadership exploring appropriate position in the organization. They seem to have volunteered to the leading roles to experience the work with other students and make it a great learning experience.

Organization in the KCUFS NMUN context did not mean an established organization in which students' work was already sorted out, structured and prefabricated. There was nothing in the beginning. Leaders were expected to begin with discussing their work, building organization, recruiting people, deciding sites and planning schedules, preparing content based on the themes they decide, training volunteers so that they would work as cultural tour guides, and planning and preparing logistics during the tour. None of students had experienced this level of organizational work previously.

Reports of students tell us their initial anxieties about their work. Even at the stage of making up their minds to participate as a leader, students seemed to have experienced hesitation from a great deal of responsibility. We can read that it was not an easy decision for any of them.

At the same time, however, students were taking NMUN work as an valuable opportunity of learning. S was a leader who worked as a leader in the logistical section. He wrote,

*The experience of managing teams was an invariable experience in that all the work I experienced through NMUN was what is expected in the business world I will enter after the graduation. Every work from the very beginning to the end:*

*From the stage of presentation for recruitment, designing workshops, making plans and manuals, work according to the plan, managing finances, to the reporting in the meetings.*

From the leaders' reports it is known that the applicants for leaders experienced more than just a small anxiety in the beginning, but they were also prepared for the coming unexpected experiences with willingness to make it a great learning opportunity—and so they did in the end. Narratives from students are convincingly telling us the potential pedagogical efficacy of NMUN as a great leadership learning opportunity for the volunteer students who work behind the conference.

### 3.3 Will of contribution to the inter-cultural understanding of delegates

As a site of cultural visits, the students chose Kyoto and Hiroshima. Having heard how thematic the cultural visit in the previous year in the Czech Republic and Poland was, students became highly concerned about the meaning of the tour they plan. What messages to be afforded about Hiroshima and Kyoto from cultural and historical points stood as a challenge for leaders. Without research they would not be able to answer this question.

Both T and F took the cultural visits as an opportunity of inter-cultural understanding, but their take of cultural visits are slightly different. F, Spanish major student, listed three things: Need of learning Japanese cultures and grasping images to the level of being able to teach others, 2) improving English skills to teach cultures in English, 3) bringing delegates back to Kobe safe. Thus good understanding of Japanese cultural contents by host students, adequate English skills and safety during the trip became three points of focus for F.

T thought of making the cultural visit a valuable opportunity for participants to think about the tragic incidents in Hiroshima and Nagasaki for themselves. She writes,

*There may be participants who want to enjoy visiting Hiroshima just as visiting other sites. I wonder if I could plan a tour which would shake their hearts and give them impacts so that the visit might contribute to the construction of peaceful world even a bit.*

She also goes on,

*I was shocked to find some of the Japanese volunteers decided to join the project only because they wanted to visit Hiroshima taking this chance.*

This gap of understandings she saw among Japanese volunteers as well as among delegates coming from overseas annoyed her, and she began to worry about the students' ability of 'teaching' Japanese cultures to the guests. This awareness about inadequacy of their own knowledge on the two cities and Japanese culture seemed a shared understanding among leaders. It was leaders themselves that needed to research and study first of all. Four chief leaders split themselves into the work of respective cities, visited sites repeatedly, explored what of their roles and prepared materials to make the best of the cultural visit. As they developed their learning, they started to make materials for volunteer tour guides, developed even a training program for them, invited them to a series of workshops as an instructor and continued the training until the conference in November. They did dry runs both in Kyoto and Hiroshima in groups and checked not only the logistical aspects of the tour but also the guiding skills of volunteers, to see whether they could function as culture guides.

Amazing was that student leaders developed a training program for 100 tour guides through the preparation process continued till November, and tour guides responded to the leaders' expectation by developing skills to the level they functioned as such.

#### 4. Collegiality

What seemed to underlie their motivation for work through preparation was their incredible sense of responsibility. The flip-side of it may have been an enormous pressure. What helped them to survive the hard experience was collegiality, existence of friends who would work together and extend assistance when in trouble. This had not been expected by leaders, nor was it a reality in the beginning, either. T writes,

*My greatest challenge was to work as 'leader'. I am the type of person who likes to take a responsible position in the organizational work, but at the same time prefers to do it perfectly by myself in the way I want. I knew this aspect of my personality might invite problems in the collaborative work. At the same time, I'm not quite good at maintaining a good relationship with others, either. When the preparation started I soon started to keep the work in my hands and not share it with my partner or others. My work began to run idle, was going nowhere. I was stuck. It was then that M, the subleader, helped me; not only once,*



*but many other times. I found that I needed her work and assistance and I had been dependent on her and other leaders a lot.*

Meanwhile, the sub-leader M writes she was not an efficient partner at all in the beginning. Since she had little idea about her role in the Cultural Visit, she was totally dependent on T and took a while to become active in the team. How she was finally able to find her role for herself, she says, is what she learned through the work with T.

Thinking that T and M worked together taking care of nearly 50 volunteers in their team, it is quite interesting that the two leaders had a different expectation for each other in the beginning and gradually found a space of collaboration between them. The process of the two leaders learning to work together seemed a bumpy slow process. It took time but may also be a necessary process for different chemicals to crack and merge.

When it comes to teamwork, collaboration is often discussed as necessary, but it is only a means for people to work together and not anything preset or endowed. Collegiality is a state of relationship that people could leap as a result of hard work and caring with each other. Two of the leaders in the other team also took a different process, but ended up with excellent teamwork. Collegiality is not anything that teachers can teach but may be something that can be learned only through this type of creative work in teams.

## 5. Conclusion

Lastly, I need to examine if four of the distilled learnings from volunteer leaders' report maintain quality of three characteristics of MUN as an educational means: Whether it is cooperative, hands-on, and experiential.

1. Process of identifying meaning for participation
2. Experience of working with 'organization' and accompanying responsibility as a leader
3. Will of contribution to the inter-cultural understanding of delegates
4. Collegiality

Learnings 2 and 4 are what students experience in the process of cooperative work. Learning 4 is also the fruit that awaits students as the result of their hard work with mates.

All from 1-4 learnings have some forms of hands-on and experiential qualities. This can be said because all four aspects of learning are only possible through the continuous reflective work. Knowing that reflection is an act directed toward experience, above results are considered as the harvest of hands-on experiential work.

Putting these discussions together, planning and running Cultural Visits as a pre-conference program can be a highly educative program whose underlining philosophy is perfectly in line with the philosophy of NMUN. More educators' attention should be put onto the learning of those volunteers as well, who plan and work behind the scenes, supporting delegates' work.

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